

Thierry de DUVE

Avant-Garde and "Deskilling" — A Simple Explanation

All civilizations and cultures of the past have linked art to technique, skill, know-how, sleight, excellence in artisanal work. And all civilizations and cultures of the past have understood that high art begins there where technique stops. Technique can go very far before it stops, or it can stop at a rudimentary level, but there is high art only if and when technique stops right there where the art-lover bows in front of an aesthetic mystery that skill fails to explain. A grace, a gift, a miracle, something that most cultures recognize as supernatural, or divine, or diabolic, in other words, as other than human, or, more prosaically, simply other. Something needs to be perceived, in skill, that breaks with skill, something in the work of the hand that is not the work of the hand, something in the traces left in matter by human work that seems to come from elsewhere and that does not address, in the art-lover, his or her capacity to recognize work well done. The trademark of high art is thus that something else that art-lovers perceive and to which they surrender. All past cultures have given religious names to this otherness (transcendence, for example), but that is not necessary. Otherness as such is a suitable name for it. As Hsieh Ho, who codified the "Six technical canons of painting" and transmitted them to all subsequent Chinese painters, wrote : "It is said that art came from the immortals. But nobody has seen them."

In all civilizations, the craft of artists obeys conventions. These are technical rules forming a body of professional know-how specific to a given trade; they are also aesthetic rules imposed on artists from outside, by that part of society which feeds and commissions them. An art tradition is stable when artists gracefully submit to the taste of their patrons and when the patrons cultivate respect for artists, that is, when artistic conventions are what every convention should be: a pact tacitly or explicitly signed between two parties who know who they are and what they want. For example, I would like to ask our hosts if the extraordinary stability of the Chinese painting tradition could not be explained by the highly ritualized nature of the relationships between painters and art-lovers. The pact between them must have been quite strong for the Emperor Hui Tsung, himself a painter and the protector of the Academy, to impose a painting test to all applicants to a post as a civil servant! Anyway, when the artists and

their public have thus conventionally agreed on the technical and aesthetic rules that tell the former how to make and the latter how to appreciate works of art, then the normal cultural conditions for art are set. When both parties also expect that at a certain point rules cease to be valid, that the convention stop and that a miracle take place, then the cultural conditions allowing the blossoming of high art are set, because both parties declare themselves ready to bow before this something else which is the trademark of high art, before otherness as such.

Among the great civilizations, the modern West has, for better and for worse, a unique place. The historical moment, called modernity, when the West conquered and colonized the world is also the moment when it radically lost the hope, the possibility, and even the desire for high art. The causes of this loss are known and too vast to be more than evoked here, as a mere backdrop. They are, by and large, industrialization, the progress of democracy, and the decline of religion. Against this backdrop, here is now the phenomenon which is my topic: the birth of the avant-garde towards the middle of the nineteenth Century, that is, the birth of modern art, with all that followed, down to international contemporary art. I would like to propose an explanation for it, which inevitably suffers from being much too simple but which, I hope, has the advantage of taking off from a point common to all cultures, namely the roots of art in artisanal craftsmanship. The explanation unfolds in three steps: 1) The avant-garde begins when no one knows anymore to whom art addresses itself. 2) The avant-garde becomes the rule when, moreover, no one knows anymore who is or is not a legitimate artist. 3) The avant-garde longs after the impossible, it wants high art.

Let's tackle the three steps of the explanation one by one. 1) The avant-garde begins when no one knows anymore to whom art addresses itself. It so happens that the avant-garde was born in France, and not by chance, because France has produced an institution which has no equivalent elsewhere: the Salon. Created as an offspring of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, an institution which held a quasi-monopoly over the artists' access to their profession, the Salon did something unheard of. Almost from its inception on, it opened the production of those living artists agreed by the Academy (later by the Institut or the Ecole des Beaux-Arts) to the appreciation of the crowd, of the people, of just anybody and everybody. Anybody could go and visit

the Salon, regardless of social class, and people went indeed: there were 850,000 visitors to the 1855 Salon. And people judged, too. A public space for private aesthetic judgment was thus created, which blatantly contradicted the protective measures with which the Academy sought to maintain its aesthetic standards and the continuity of its tradition. The birth of the pictorial avant-garde is inseparable from the conflictual institutional history of the Salon, as is shown by a string of well-known crucial events, such as Courbet's quarrel with the Salon in 1851, the Salon des Refusés in 1863, Manet's partial rejection from the 1874 Salon, and the first Salon des Indépendants in 1884, whose motto was "No prizes, no jury". Let's stop here.

2) The avant-garde becomes the rule when no one knows anymore who is legitimately an artist. With the creation of the Société des artistes indépendants (Society of Independent Artists), which anyone could join without the test of a jury, not only does no one really know to whom art addresses itself any longer, moreover, the authority capable of saying who is or is not legitimately an artist has collapsed. The Independents are not alone responsible for this, of course, but they typically illustrate the social conditions that have made the birth of the avant-garde necessary. If everyone is a judge of art and if anyone can be an artist, making art is meaningless. Only high art, and nothing less, could be meaningful. The bond that all past civilizations and cultures established between art and technique, skill, know-how, sleight, excellence in artisanal work, is not broken, but it has become insignificant. The possession of a craft no longer draws the line between artist and non-artist. What might draw the line is only the collective judgment that would grant this and refuse that practitioner the mysterious capacity of making us feel the place where technique ought to stop and where an aesthetic miracle occurs. It's all or nothing.

3) The avant-garde aims at this all or nothing; it wants high art; it longs after the impossible. But why has high art become impossible? Neither because talent is scarcer than it was nor because skill got lost for lack of rigorous teaching. On the contrary. If we were to judge 19th Century academic painting by the quality of its craftsmanship, it would win all prizes. And Bouguereau was full of talent. High art is impossible because high art begins there where craftsmanship stops, and because no one knows anymore where craftsmanship ought to stop. When artists no longer know whom they

address and when the public puts their quality as artists in doubt, how could both parties possibly agree that they expect art to grant them those aesthetic delights occurring there where neither skill nor talent explains anything? How could they possibly surrender together to that something else that makes for high art? How could they possibly put the mysterious point where the *métier* ought to stop in the same place? They don't even agree on the conventions of the *métier*. In order to sign a convention with someone, you need to have someone facing you and to know who he or she is. Painters should know for whom they paint, and the Parisian bourgeois who visits the Salon should know with whom he is dealing. Let's take the 1851 Salon. (It is an interesting one, due both to the number of exhibited works — 4,000 — and to its political context, since it opened one month after Louis-Napoléon's coup.) With whom should the Parisian bourgeois deal? With the dignified Edouard Dubufe who shows a *Portrait of Mme F.* in the manner of Ingres? With the ambiguous Chassériau whose *Sapho* endlessly hesitates between Ingres and Delacroix? With the suave Gérôme and his *Gynécée*? With Corot, who is mythological for once? Or must he make a deal with the new school called the Realists: Tassaert, Antigna, Haussat, Lacoste, Pils, whom he finds a bit too vulgar? Will he accept that Millet's *Semeur* and his *Botteleurs*, which are so unfinished and so botched, but which give him emotion, even repulsion, embody the new painting conventions? How do you want the Parisian bourgeois to know whether this Mr. Courbet, about whom everybody gossips and whose *Enterrement à Ornans* defies the Salon in spite of a hostile jury, is a dangerous revolutionary who preaches the hatred of art, as the critic Chennevières pretends, or whether Mr. Courbet is inventing the art of the real, as is stubbornly upheld by Champfleury? The Parisian bourgeois is lost. He has the feeling, and rightly so, that some artists have bargained with the jury behind his back while others — to hell the jury! — have struck a deal with the devil. Now, even those artists had better known who is this devil to whom they sold their soul. Nothing is secure on their side of the fence either. Should not Mr. Courbet himself decide if he wants to address the Parisian intellectuals or the peasants of Flagey and the gravediggers of Ornans — or is it perhaps the bourgeoisie from Besançon, with whom he tests the painting before he sends it to the Salon? And what is valid for Courbet is valid for the others. Gérôme doesn't know either for whom he paints any longer: is it for the jury, for the members of the Institut, for the crowd who tramples the Salon, for his master Gleyre, for Théophile Gautier who so gallantly praised him three

years earlier for his *Combat de coqs*, for the museum, in other words, for the public of the future?

Since Courbet and Gérôme share the same conditions at the 1851 Salon, and since they both paint for the Salon (which will still be true of Manet, of Seurat, even of Cézanne), why is the former the painter of the newly born avant-garde and the latter no more than a skillful academic painter? Modernity has judged. Put the *Enterrement à Ornans* and the *Gynécée* side by side, and you'll see that Courbet aims at high art and that Gérôme caters to a particular taste. That's true. You'll see that Courbet is an artist and that Gérôme has skill. That's true. And you'll see that both painters treat the conventions of their *métier* quite differently. The current view is that Courbet breaks them and that Gérôme respects them; moreover, that Courbet is great because he breaks them. Admit that this explanation is problematic. It certainly is for someone who would approach western modern art from the outside, from Chinese culture, for example, and who, knowing that all cultures have always linked art with technical excellence, would find it difficult to understand why breaking with that excellence should be a value in itself. This explanation is problematic also for some of today's western critics and art historians who, disappointed or alarmed by the avant-gardistic discourse, by its failed promise of liberation and its apology of the *tabula rasa*, notice that with each passing generation avant-garde artists have lost a little more of their skill, and who judge that art has finally lapsed into some "anything goes". And it is problematic above all for those who are not seduced by the revisionist sirens and do not want to throw the baby with the bathwater. It is above all for those, who refuse the false alternative of having to either legitimate or reject contemporary art wholesale in the name of an avant-gardistic logic, that it is urgent to find another explanation to what the conservatives call "deskilling" and the hardcore modernists call art's reduction to the essentials.

So, in order to try to understand what was at issue in the avant-garde's treatment of the conventions of painting, we need to put the emphasis on the convention, not as a technical and aesthetic rule, but rather as a pact. The current view simply signed a pact with the avant-garde, therefore we shouldn't be surprised that it values by way of convention the breaking of conventions. The current view is right in Courbet's case, but not always. And anyway it explains nothing. We had better understand that if the

partners in the pact are out of focus the pact is fuzzy too, and that artists are not responsible. They are only responsible for not missing their epoch. The newness created by the Salon is that every pictorial convention that is broken signifies that a pact has been breached with one faction of the public and that a demand for a new pact has been addressed to another faction, eventually. To reduce these factions to the battle between academicism and the avant-garde is too simple. Of course, there is the Academy, the jury, the Beaux-Arts, but all these people do not uphold the same monolithic opinion, conservative by definition. On the other hand, there are of course sensitive and bold critics, some enlightened art-lovers and collectors, an artistic and literary intelligentsia who defends the avant-garde, but there are also conservative critics, a narrowminded bourgeoisie, an uncultivated lower class, philistines of all sorts. Whatever the case may be, all painters have to do with the indeterminate public of the Salon; none of them is sure that he will please everybody at once; all paint with an unpredictable anonymous crowd peering over their shoulder. The painters experience the contradictory expectations of this crowd as aesthetic demands, tastes and prejudices issued by others, but they experience them brushes in hand and in front of their canvas. They thus experience aesthetically, with their sensibility, and through the mediation of the technical constraints of their trade, the necessity to sign a pact with an indeterminate addressee. It is under the pressure of these technical constraints that an artist worthy of the name creates, accepts or breaks a convention, that is, the pact. Conversely, it is under the pressure of the pact — a pact which the artist may sense as natural if he is in harmony with his public, and as usurped, violent, unfair, inadequate, absurd, *passé*, scandalous, morally or politically unacceptable, if the public with whom he is supposed to sign it is not the one he wishes, or which he wants to address, or which he deems worthy of his work — that he creates, accepts or transgresses aesthetically a technical constraint. In breaking the convention (the rule), avant-garde artists provoke the public to take stock of the fact that the convention (the pact), being uncertain, is for all practical purposes already broken and needs to be negotiated anew, case by case. Conversely, in breaking the convention (the pact), avant-garde artists make the technical and aesthetic conventions (rules) of their trade the place for the negotiation. If and when a new aesthetic agreement (pact) is reached, it can only be between artists who put their legitimacy as artists at stake on technical matters, and sophisticated viewers who understand that it is precisely there where the conventions (rules) of their taste have

been violently challenged that they are summoned to reconstitute the pact. There, in other terms, where technique stops.

Throughout the period that saw the birth of the avant-garde, the prevailing feeling was that technique stops too soon. That the painting remains unfinished. That the painter has the insolence to confront the public with a sketch, at most. From Daumier to the white monochrome, the history of modern painting never tired of bringing the moment of the first brushstroke and that of the last closer to each other; of seeking to make visible, as such, the place where technique fails to explain anything; of isolating that something else that makes us surrender to a painting in spite of its displaying the most rudimentary technique; of putting the finger on this pure otherness which is the trademark of high art — an otherness already brilliantly alluded to in an aphorism allegedly uttered by the great painter Su Tung P'o: "If a poem is written as such a poem should be written, you can be sure he is not a poet." Of course, the comparison is called for (and it was made often) between western abstract painting and Chinese painting or calligraphy, particularly with the painting of the *literati* fostered by Su Tung P'o. Hsieh Ho already said that a successful painting must give the impression that the artist has the skill to do more and the will to do less. "Less is more" is neither a western nor a modern invention. And in the famous painting treatise known under the title of the *Mustard Seed Garden*, it is said that in the work of a master, "the idea is there even where the brush didn't go." On an aesthetic level, comparison with modern painting, with Hartung or Tal Coat, for example, is legitimate. But with regard to the traditions to which the artists respectively belong, the similarity is misleading. Chinese art is an extremely formalized art, resting on a highly technical tradition transmitted with great rigor over very long periods of time, which naturally supposes that stable conventions have been passed among people who know very well who they are and with whom they are dealing. The West arrived at stylistically similar things through a diametrically opposed path: only from the moment when, at the Salon and then at the Salon des Indépendants, the casting of the artists and their audience in their respective roles became less and less certain, did the former provoke the acquiescence of the latter by bringing the moment when technique stops closer and closer to the blank canvas, to color as it comes out of the tube, to raw material, and to elementary gestures.

It would be a mistake to think that the art yielded by the avant-garde no longer rests at all on technical know-how. That would be confusing the moment when technique stops with the moment when skill gets lost. On the contrary, it would be fair to say, I believe, that this art no longer implies a consensus, a pact, about technical skill. That's why the avant-garde, this art movement that started in France in the 19th Century, was forced to aim at all or nothing, to strive for high art. Whether or not it succeeded is something else. Evidently high art is rare, whether in the West or in China or anywhere. Moreover, high art has become impossible, its conditions are no longer there. But the striving for high art has so to speak become the norm for the whole tradition that sprang from the avant-garde. To make the impossible into a norm, that gives you an idea of the proud ambition of the avant-garde. And of its extreme fragility. If everyone is a judge of art and if anyone can be an artist, making art is meaningless. Only high art, and nothing less, could be meaningful. That's crazy, but that's the way it is. There is no proof for this, only a sign. It lies in the fact that it is often when something risks not being identified as art at all that it strives for high art.

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